



A group of seminary students were playing basketball in a local gym one day. They left their backpacks and books along the wall of the gym. The janitor, who opened the gym for them, would sit there and read their books while they played. He especially liked to read out of their Bibles. One morning one of the students asked him what he was reading and he said, "Revelation." The seminarian smiled. He had read all the commentaries on Revelation and concluded the book was hopelessly confusing. So he asked, "Do you understand it?" The janitor said, "Sure." With a bit of sarcasm he then asked, "Well, what does it all mean?" The janitor paused and looked around the gym for a second, and then he said, "It means Jesus is gonna win."

Throughout our study on the book of Revelation we've seen that he's right. The overall message of this book is Jesus is gonna win. It's very important to keep that in mind as we come to a passage like the one before us today. Revelation 20 is perhaps the most controversial chapter in the entire Bible. It's only 15 verses long, yet entire systems of theology have been built around these verses. Christian churches have split and friendships have been destroyed over different opinions of these verses.

Before we dive into this chapter let me say I believe this is a mistake. Don't get me wrong, truth is important. Theology is important. Developing convictions based on our study of the Bible is important. And there are some truths that are worth fighting for. But we have to discern the difference between what's at the core of our faith and what's secondary. There are some core convictions that Christians everywhere have always believed. For example, a core conviction is that Jesus will come back. We can't compromise on that. But there are also secondary issues that are okay to have strong opinions about, but still aren't worth dividing the body of Christ over. It's in this category that I place the differing views on Revelation 20.

We currently have seven elders and several pastors at CPC. I know for a fact that we don't all agree on how to interpret this chapter. We all agree on the core convictions, but there are also things we agree to disagree on. We don't feel we have to agree on these secondary issues to work together. I'm sure some of you here have deep convictions about these things. Many of you aren't really sure what the issues are and you're not that concerned. Either way, let's abide by that rule: "On essentials, unity; on nonessentials, liberty; on all things, charity."

With that said, let me start by giving you an overview of this chapter.

Overview of the events of chapter 20

First, the context. Chapter 20 follows chapter 19. In chapter 19 we read of the glorious return of Jesus Christ. This precipitates a great war, sometimes called the battle of Armageddon. The beast and the false prophet deceive many and they gather together to fight against God and his people but they're defeated before the battle even begins. The beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. Those fighting with them are left for the birds to eat. Meanwhile, the church, God's people, are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb.

This brings us to chapter 20. I want to break this passage down into four parts with a word for each one: binding, reigning, deceiving and judging. Let's start with **binding**. In verses 1-3 Satan is bound.

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time."

This is straightforward. John sees an angel with a key and a chain. He lays hold of the dragon. There's no question who the dragon is; he's the serpent of old, Satan, the devil. He's the third part of the false trinity: the beast, the false prophet and the dragon. The angel seizes him and throws him into the abyss, which is the home of demons. He then shuts it and seals it for 1,000 years so he can't deceive the nations any longer.

Next section: **reigning**. During this time when Satan is bound, God's people are raised up to reign with him.

"Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first

resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years" (verses 4–6).

John sees thrones and people sitting on them. They have a job to do: "*judgment was given to them.*" These people are further identified as those who have been beheaded for their faith and haven't worshipped the beast. John says they "*come to life*" and reign with Christ for this period of 1,000 years. He calls this "*the first resurrection*" and the people who participate in it are "*blessed.*" But there are others he calls "*the rest of the dead.*" They don't come to life in the first resurrection. As we'll see later, there's another resurrection.

Section three: **deceiving**. After 1,000 years Satan is released for a short period of time to resume his work of deceiving the nations.

"When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (verses 7–10).

Satan does a lot of damage during his short parole. His deceptive powers are great. He gathers people from all over the world. Gog and Magog are names symbolic of God's enemies. They surround God's people living in Jerusalem, the "*beloved city.*" But before they can even lift a sword they're devoured by fire from heaven. The devil is then thrown into the lake of fire to join the beast and the false prophet.

Final section: **judging**. John sees a great white throne and him who sat on it. Look what happens.

"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's

name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (verses 11–15).

At the sight of God, heaven and earth flee to make room for the new creation. John sees the dead, standing before the throne for judgment. These are "*the rest of the dead*" we saw in v.5. Now they're raised up in a second resurrection for judgment. Two books are opened. One book is the book of life. We've seen that book before in Revelation. In it are written the names of all those who belong to Jesus. The other book records the deeds of men and women. People are judged according to their deeds. The last thing that's judged is death and Hades. In God's new creation neither will exist. They're thrown into the lake of fire along with all whose names are not in the book of life.

So that's the most controversial chapter in the Bible! It's not so hard, is it? You all get this, right? Why then is it so divisive?

Three main views on the Millennium

Throughout church history there have been three interpretations of this chapter. Each of them have been held by sincere, Jesus-loving, Bible-centered believers. They're known as pre-millennialism, post-millennialism, and a-millennialism .

Each of these is named for when Jesus returns in relation to the 1,000 years mentioned several times in this chapter, better known as the millennium. Let's start with **pre-millennialism**. This view claims Jesus comes back before the millennium. That's why it's "pre-mil." When Jesus returns he binds Satan and shuts him away. Satan has no power or influence at all. Also at his coming, not just martyrs but all believers who have died are physically resurrected. During this 1,000 year period, Jesus sets up his kingdom on earth and his people reign with him. That doesn't mean everyone is a true follower of Christ during the millennium, but they do live under his rule. After 1,000 years is up, Satan is released. He tries one more time to destroy God's people and take over the earth, but instead he's destroyed and thrown into the lake of fire. The rest of humanity is then physically raised up in a second resurrection and brought before the throne for judgment. Those whose names aren't written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. Then comes the new heavens and the new earth.

Here is the second view: **post-millennialism**. In this option, Jesus comes back **after** the one thousand years. Thus the label "post-mil." This view is very optimistic. The post-mils believe the pre-mils underestimate the power of the gospel. They believe **before** Jesus comes, there will be a long period when Satan is bound because the gospel will win the day and the world will become Christianized. Little by little, the world will be wonderfully influenced and transformed through the preaching of the gospel. This view seizes upon Jesus' teaching about the mystery of the kingdom in Mt 13, where Jesus says the kingdom is like leaven that grows slowly and comes not with a bang, but quietly,

imperceptibly. After this long period, just before Jesus appears, Satan is released and gets one more try, but fails. Jesus returns at the end of the millennium, throws him into the lake of fire, and we enter the glorious new creation.

Here is the last option: **a-millennialism**. In this option, the 1,000 years is understood symbolically. There is no literal 1,000-year reign of Jesus. Jesus began his reign in his first coming, and his followers are spiritually raised up to reign with him when they are born again. So we're in the millennium now. Christ reigns over us now in a spiritual way. Satan was defeated and bound through the cross at Jesus' first coming. It's not that Satan is totally out of the picture, but he's no longer able to deceive the nations and prevent people from believing the gospel. Didn't Jesus describe his own ministry of casting out demons with these words: *"How can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house"* (Mat 12:29). A-mils also believe that at some point in the future, Satan will be released for one final evil onslaught. But then Jesus will come again and destroy him, and the new creation begins.

So these are the three views. Each of them has its own merits. And each has had its own heyday in the history of the church. Many of the early church fathers in the first 300 years of church history were pre-mil: Irenaeus, Tertullian to name two. But Augustine came along in the fourth century and he was a-mil. That view dominated for almost 1,500 years. Luther and Calvin were a-mil. But then in the late 17th and early 18th century post-mils won the day. This was the view held by Jonathan Edwards. In recent years, the most popular evangelical position has been pre-mil, but many are also a-mil.

Reasons I prefer the Pre-millennial view

You might wonder where I stand on this issue. Maybe you've heard the old joke, "I'm a pan-millennialist. I believe it will all pan out in the end!" I kind of like that, because it's true. It will all pan out in the end, just like the janitor said, "Jesus is gonna win." But I do have a view on this and I owe it to you to tell you what it is. I see many strengths in the other options, but I believe pre-millennialism is the best option. I don't have time to explain all the reasons why, but let me just give you a few from my study of this passage.

First of all, the binding of Satan described in verses 2-3 hardly matches the reality of his murderous and deceptive activity in the present time. That being true, it's hard to see how we could be in the millennium now as a-mills claim. John sees Satan not just bound but thrown into the abyss, which is then shut and sealed. I find it hard to believe that someone bound and sealed off in the abyss could be as active in the world as Satan is today. It's hard to see how our present world matches up with this description of the millennium.

Second, pre-millennialism honors the flow of Revelation 19 and 20. In chapter 19 Jesus returns on his great white horse and throws the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire. Chapter 20 presupposes this has already happened. Verse 10 says, *"And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also."* It makes the most sense, therefore, to say what happens in chapter 20 (the millennium) takes place **after** the return of Christ in chapter 19. Chapter 19—Jesus returns, the battle of Armageddon takes place, Jesus wins and throws the beast and false prophet into the lake of fire. Chapter 20—He binds Satan, God's people are raised up, and the millennium begins on earth.

Third, pre-millennialism interprets verses 4-5 consistently. Verse 4 speaks of those who *"come to life and reign with Christ."* Then in v.5 it speaks of *"the rest of the dead who did not come to life until the thousand years were completed."* The same word *"come to life"* is used in both verses. It stands to reason they would both mean the same thing. But a-mils say v.4 refers to a spiritual resurrection akin to being born again while v.5 refers to the physical resurrection at Jesus' Second Coming. That's inconsistent. It makes much more sense to say believers are physically raised up to reign with Christ at the start of the millennium and after the millennium unbelievers are physically raised up to be judged.

Fourth, v.4 makes it clear that when the millennium takes place, many people have already been martyred. It stands to reason that this took place during the Tribulation. That means the Tribulation takes place before the millennium. But a-mils and post-mils require that the Tribulation takes place after the millennium when Satan is released. To me that doesn't add up.

Fifth, a literal millennium actually serves a purpose. Think about it. After being locked up for a very long period of time Satan still gets right back to his old work of deceiving the nations as soon as he's released. It's like God gave him a "time-out" but it didn't work. How stubborn can you be! A thousand years in prison and he still won't repent! But here's an even bigger surprise. Many of those people who had the opportunity to live during the millennium when Jesus reigned will be the very same ones who are later deceived by Satan after he's released. Think about that. These people have 1,000 years of freedom from the influence of evil, 1,000 years to experience the reign of Jesus. But their hearts are so twisted towards evil that as soon as Satan is freed they're once again deceived. Even the millennium won't change man's basic tendency to rebel against his Creator. A lot of people today blame the bad things people do on the environment, but this shows the problem is in our own hearts.

So that's my view, but you don't have to agree with me. I'm not saying there aren't problems with my view, there are. Am I 100% sure I'm right? No. Will I die for this view? No. So you study the

evidence yourself. Come to your own conclusion. But remember what I said, On essentials, unity; on nonessentials, liberty; on all things, charity.

Conclusion

I know this has sounded like a seminary lecture. I've tried to avoid that in preaching through the first 19 chapters of Revelation. But with Revelation 20 I couldn't avoid it. So I want to spend the rest of the time asking the question, what does all of this mean to us? Of course, the big idea is that Jesus is gonna win, but we've also seen in this chapter that those who follow him will get to share in his victory. Let me relate this to a few of the key words I gave you earlier: binding, reigning and judging.

Binding. How encouraging to know Satan will be bound. I love how Jesus doesn't even get his hands dirty on this. All he has to do is send an angel to collar him. Throughout Revelation we've been encouraged to take evil seriously; to take the devil seriously. He's the dragon. Dragons are scary. Jesus called him a liar and a murderer. He's the accuser of the brethren. But make no mistake, the One who lives in us is more powerful than him. First, God will give Satan a serious "time-out." When that doesn't work, he'll throw him into the lake of fire. And he knows all of this and he's really ticked off. All his activity now is that of a bad loser who lashes out at us in frustration. That's why Luther could sing, "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us." Take the devil into account, respect the damage he can do, beware of him, but don't fear him. He shutters at the name of Jesus. Whether he seeks to tempt you, or deceive you, or accuse you, or devour you, God will deliver you. Jesus is gonna win and those who follow him will get to share in his victory.

Reigning. Part of our hope as believers is not only that we spiritually reign with him now but we'll physically reign with him later. Daniel wrote, *"But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever... Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One..."* (Dan 7:18-22). Jesus promised the disciples, *"...you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel"* (Mt 19:28). Paul wrote the Corinthians, *"Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?"* (1 Cor 6:2). Isn't it great to know that

though we are called to suffer with him now we will one day reign with him? I think v.4 indicates that those who have been martyred will even enjoy some kind of special status. But for all of us this is great to know. Following Jesus can be hard sometimes. We don't get all the goodies now. Instead of reigning, there are times we feel like we're being walked on. But that won't last forever. Jesus is gonna win and those who follow him will get to share in his victory.

Judging. There are clearly two things going on at judgment. Two books are opened. One book records all of our deeds, both good and bad. The other has all the names of those who have trusted in Jesus as Savior. Both books will be opened on the day of judgment. Those whose names are in the book of life have no fear of being condemned. If we know Christ we don't have to worry about what John calls *"the second death."* The *"second death"* is eternal condemnation. Scripture says *"there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* But we will be evaluated, not for the purpose of determining salvation but for the purpose of determining rewards. But that's a day we look forward to. Most believers I talk to don't get this. They don't look forward to judgment because they're afraid God will finally catch up to them and make them pay for all the bad stuff they've done. But think of it this way, the One who will be our Judge will also be our defense attorney. There will be things brought to light that we're not proud of, but we have Jesus Christ sitting right next to us to plead our case. We have nothing to fear because he already paid for our sins.

Binding, reigning and judging. When I think of all of this I think followers of Christ ought to look at the future with great anticipation. It's kind of like my oldest daughter. She worked for Facebook for about a year. And of course everyone who works for Facebook looks forward to the time when they will go public because they will get a slice of the pie. As a matter of fact, my daughter was willing to endure a two-month separation from her husband who had moved to Connecticut for a job of his own just so she could get enough tenure to get a slice of that pie when the big day comes.

That's like us. We should be willing to endure anything as followers of Jesus now because we know Jesus is gonna win and we will get to share in his victory! His Kingdom is going public! I'm looking forward to that, aren't you?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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